

SATURDAY NIGHT

Harry Stevens's sensational probe into worker exploitation in the thirties shamed the department stores, helped defeat Prime Minister Bennett — and changed the nation's mind about government's role in the private sector

Nobody could tell exactly when it began and nobody could predict when it would end. At the outset they didn't even call it a depression. But it hasn't been easy for later generations to comprehend its devastating impact. The Depression lies just over the hill of memory; after all, anyone who had reached voting age in 1929 is over eighty today. Soon, not many will be left who can remember what it was like to live on water for an entire day, as the Templeton family did in Parkdale, Toronto, in 1932, or how it felt to

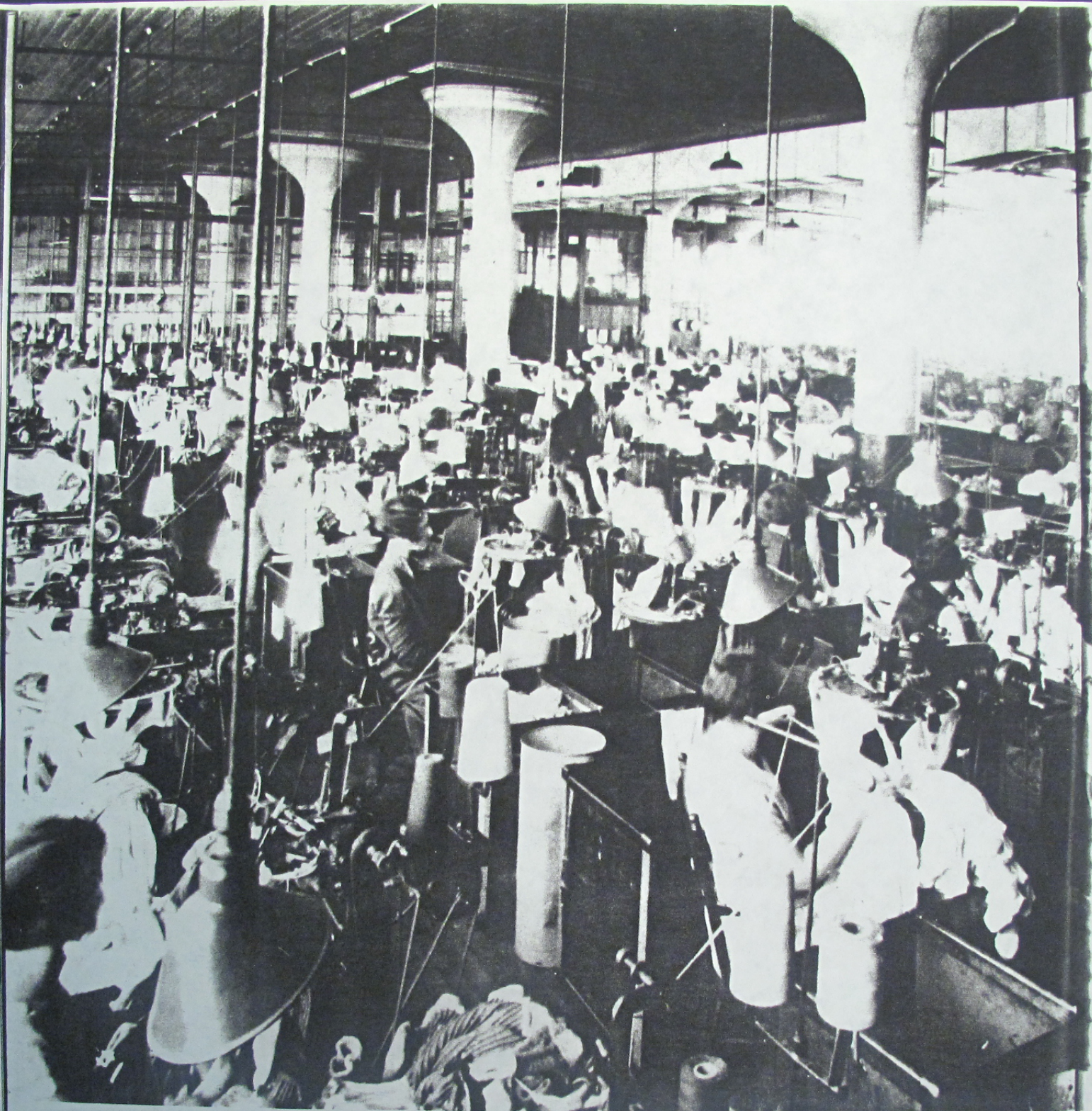


own a single dress made of flour sacks, as Etha Munro did in the drought-ravaged Saskatchewan prairie in 1934.

The statistics of those times are appalling. At the nadir of the Depression, half the wage earners in Canada were on some form of relief. One Canadian in five was a public dependant. Every level of government tried to evade its responsibilities for the jobless. Ottawa tried to lay it on the provinces. The provinces tried to lay it on the municipalities. The municipalities tried to lay it on the local taxpayers who couldn't cope with it because so many of them were already unemployed. Then everybody — taxpayers, municipalities, and provinces — turned on Ottawa. The federal government used words like "fiscal responsibility" and "a sound dollar" as excuses to ignore human despair. Balancing the budget was more important

By **PIERRE BERTON**

**MINIMUM
WAGE ACT
BROKEN
FACTORY
GIRLS
DRIVEN
NEARLY
INSANE**



than feeding the hungry. The bogey of the deficit was enlisted to tighten the purse strings.

Richard Bedford Bennett, who presided over the five worst years, 1930-35, said he was determined to preserve the nation's credit "at whatever sacrifice." But the burden of that sacrifice did not fall on his shoulders — or on those of his equally parsimonious opponent, Mackenzie King. It fell on those who, in spite of the politicians' reassurances to the contrary, were starving and naked: on the little girl in the Gaspé who fainted one day in school because, as her teacher discovered, it wasn't her

turn for breakfast that morning; on another little girl in Alberta who could go to school only on those days when it was her turn to wear "the dress"; on the Ottawa landlord who collapsed in the street from hunger because none of his tenants had been able to pay rent; on the New Brunswick father who awoke one cold winter night in a house empty of fuel to check on his three-month-old baby, only to find her frozen to death.

The most shocking statistic of all reveals that from 1930 to 1936 the federal government paid out more of the taxpayers' money to service the debt of the Canadian National Railways



photograph courtesy National Archives of Canada/CS387

At the forewoman's desk,
a large sheet showed
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girl was under her quota.
Those who fell too far
behind lost their jobs

than it did on unemployment relief. That debt was the legacy of the great Canadian boom. Revered as audacious and far-seeing captains of industry, the builders of the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific (not to mention the government's own National Transcontinental) had enjoyed a free ride on the backs of the people. Where was "fiscal responsibility" then? Without that burden of debt the government could have doubled its relief payments to every family in Canada.

Still, had there been no railway debt, would either King or Bennett have taken that generous route? One doubts it. Neither

had any coordinated plan of relief. Like the business leaders who backed them, they were convinced the Depression couldn't last and made no long-range plans to deal with it. Planning, after all, was a dirty word in the thirties, a subversive notion that smacked of Soviet Russia.

Both Liberal and Conservative governments stumbled from crisis to crisis, adopting Band-Aid solutions that often became part of the problem. If single transients clogged the streets of the big cities — get them out of sight. If radicals demanded a better deal for the jobless — jail them. If foreigners asked for relief — deport them. If farmers staged hunger strikes — break them up with police billies. At no time did those in charge consider the practical advantages of allowing the dispossessed to let off steam, unmolested.

Relief was given grudgingly. The Calvinist work ethic belonged to an earlier century, but it lived on into the thirties. Conventional wisdom held that any healthy man could always find a job; that if he was idle it was deliberate; that to ask for public charity was shameful; that those who got too much of it wouldn't want to work. Thus, it was held, relief should provide no more than the bare necessities and should never approach "real" wages.

Bennett himself clung to this view and indicated more than once that the present generation of Canadians was "soft," that they lacked the rugged independence of their forebears, and the ability to make sacrifices. That sounded strange coming from one of the richest men in Canada, who owed his wealth to a legacy. By Bennett's standards, anybody who applied for relief

A CLARKSON, GORDON STUDY CONFIRMED IT: TORONTO DEPARTMENT STORES WERE ABETTING SWEATSHOPS IN QUEBEC

was a failure. Rather than endure this humiliation, thousands shunned the relief offices. In 1934, a United Church worker in central Manitoba discovered that many farm families were going without underwear, bedding, or shoes for their children who as a result couldn't attend school. All were entitled to relief, but they couldn't bring themselves to apply for it.

Families made do as long as possible before "going on the pogy" as the phrase had it. Houses went without repair, automobiles were allowed to wear out, clothing was patched, repatched, and patched again before people would endure "the soul-searing shame of applying for relief."

That was the phrase that a Great War veteran, Victor Nelson Swanston, used in 1931 when he finally made the long, mortifying journey to the Regina relief office. He had no choice: he had been laid off from his auto-assembly job. He had worked briefly as a harvest hand, but with his resources spent there was no food left in the house and his wife was in tears.

Out came an inspector to make absolutely sure the family was destitute. He searched the empty cupboards, and he even opened the door of the oven to make sure the cunning Swanstons hadn't squirrelled away any food. In the end, the family was given enough to eat.

To pay for his weekly groceries, Swanston was put to work digging ditches and cleaning Regina's streets. There were no rest periods because if the men stopped to smoke there was always an angry taxpayer rushing to phone the City Works Department to ask why these ne'er-do-wells weren't working. At school, the four Swanston children were jeered at. "Reliefers! Reliefers!" their schoolmates shouted. There was no hiding their shame; their daily free half pint of milk gave the secret away.

The Depression played havoc with *laissez faire*. For the first time Canadians began to realize that government *must* interfere in the private affairs of the nation. The Wheat Board, the Bank of Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and Trans-Canada Airlines were among the public corporations born of those hungry years. Anyone who advocated today's social services in the pre-Depression era would have been considered a dangerous radical and, in truth, some were. But the hard times changed people's minds.

JOB — THAT WAS THE MAGIC word in the thirties. The country was divided between those who had jobs and those who had none. *Job* was the key to respectability. *Job* was the open sesame to status. *Job* separated you from the shuffling mob of unemployed who were seen as members of a lower stratum.

Yet thousands of Canadians were paid such low wages and worked such long hours that they were liv-

R. B. Bennett, one of the nation's richest men, called the Depression generation of Canadians "soft" — unwilling to endure character-building sacrifices



ing in a state some observers thought was close to slavery.

The facts began coming to light in the spring of 1934 thanks to Henry Herbert Stevens, the member for East Kootenay, B.C., who was minister of trade and commerce in the Bennett cabinet. The parliamentary committee he instigated and headed, and the royal commission that succeeded it, provide the most comprehensive picture we have of working conditions and wage rates in central Canada in the early thirties.

At fifty-five, Harry Stevens was not a typical Conservative. A greengrocer's son, born in England, he was a Methodist lay preacher and reformer. In a later day he would have been called a Red Tory. In his photographs he looks passive and plump, peering benignly through his rimless spectacles.

AS BAD GREW WORSE, OTTAWA CONTINUED TO BELIEVE A SOUND DOLLAR WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN HUMAN SUFFERING

He was anything but passive.

In January, 1934, the prime minister asked Stevens to fill in for him at the annual convention of the Retail Shoe Merchants and Shoe Manufacturers Association to be held in Toronto mid-month. No doubt Bennett expected the usual palliatives — words of encouragement to the shoe men, forecasts that the Depression would soon be over and business conditions on the mend. What he got from Harry Stevens was something quite different — a diatribe against big business, notably chain and department stores, for using their immense buying power as a stick to crush the small entrepreneur and bring about sweatshop conditions.

Lurking in the background was the powerful figure of Warren K. Cook, a wealthy Toronto clothing manufacturer with a social conscience. A big, handsome, self-made man, Cook had worked his way up through the rag trade with a line of quality merchandise which he sold to a series of independent outlets. He had no love for the department stores who would not take his lines, preferring to sell suits of poorer quality for as low as fifteen dollars. Cook's prices started at \$29.50.

The previous year, in his role as president of the Canadian Association of Garment Manufacturers, Cook had launched an investigation of conditions in the men's clothing industry and had chosen two prominent radicals — Harry Cassidy of the University of Toronto and Frank Scott of McGill — to undertake it. These two men, who had helped found the CCF, supplied Cook with the ammunition to pass on to Stevens.

Stevens's audience loved it; the big Toronto department stores didn't. The speech, which was heard on the radio, elicited a howl of protest from Eaton's and Simpson's. "Don't let the tremendous weight of advertising in the public press muzzle you," Stevens had told his audience. Some newspapers, he said, "dare not publish these things or denounce them because of the advertising receipts that make it impossible for them to talk." The truth of that charge was evident the following morning when *The Globe* gave its front page not to Stevens's speech but to denials by both Eaton's and Simpson's.

The department stores took their case to the prime minister,

who called Stevens into his office and told him to cease and desist. Stevens immediately offered his resignation. Bennett back-pedalled. He had been snowed under by a blizzard of letters supporting his maverick colleague. With an election coming up the following year it was no time to have any minister — especially *this* minister — running around the country claiming that big business had muzzled him.

Bennett gave Stevens and Cook what they wanted — a special parliamentary committee, with Stevens as chairman, to investigate mass-buying practices by chain and department stores, and labour conditions in industry and in the baking and meat-packing fields. The press called it “the most sweeping parliamentary probe into industrial conditions ever attempted in Canada,” and so it was.

From late February until the end of June, witness after witness appeared before the Stevens Committee, as it was called, to describe working conditions and wage scales in a variety of major Canadian enterprises. Time and again, the eleven parliamentarians who made up the committee registered shock and anger at the testimony.

The tobacco companies, for example, were obviously using the Depression as an excuse to cut wages. In one of the factories, hourly rates shrank by twenty-four per cent between 1931 and 1933. Meanwhile, the president of the Macdonald Tobacco Company managed to scrape by on a mere \$260,000 in salary and bonuses, still leaving an undistributed profit of \$594,432.

The five-and-dime stores — Woolworth's, Kresge's, The Metropolitan — held their employees on a tight leash by staggering hours and using part-time clerks. The women were kept on call, never knowing when they would be offered work and unable to look for other jobs. In the Metropolitan chain, female clerks averaged \$4.30 a week — less than the relief payments in Toronto.

In those days the minimum-wage laws applied only to women. As a result many employers preferred to hire men or boys, at a lower rate, so the women lost out. In Toronto the

WHEN BIG BUSINESS TOOK ITS CASE TO THE PRIME MINISTER, HE TOLD HIS MAVERICK MP TO “CEASE AND DESIST”

National Picture Frame and Art Company fired seventeen of its female employees and replaced them with men at rates as low as ten cents an hour.

The authorities neglected to enforce the legal work week for fear more discharged employees would be eligible for relief. The Ontario Factory Act, which dated from 1884, called for a ten-hour working day and a sixty-hour work week. Yet even this antiquated piece of legislation, “a relic of the dark ages of industrialism,” to quote Harry Cassidy, was ignored. In Toronto, a restaurant on Spadina Avenue paid its kitchen workers and waitresses wages as low as \$6.25 for a work week that ran as high as 100 hours. Yet this sum seems princely compared with the pittance doled out in the needle trades in French Canada. Of conditions in the needle trades the com-



Today Harry Stevens would count as a Red Tory. The rift with his leader grew so wide that when Stevens's daughter died Bennett didn't even write

mittee's final report had this to say: “We cannot, in frankness, refrain from stating that the labour and wage conditions . . . should not be tolerated in any state that claims to call itself civilized.”

Warren K. Cook appeared before the Stevens committee on March 8 to ride his particular hobbyhorse: a price-cutting war between Eaton's and Simpson's in the winter of 1932-33. Both stores were selling suits made in Quebec under sweatshop conditions.

In most cases, the Toronto retailers simply ordered the suits from a contractor who cut the cloth and then subcontracted the piecework to families in rural areas who worked out of their homes. Four women, with their husbands helping at night,

managed together to turn out between two and a half and three dozen men's pants in a day. For this they were paid sixty cents a dozen; but five cents of that was deducted for thread. In short, they were earning little more than forty cents a day each.

Under such conditions Simpson's was able to pay as little as thirteen dollars for a man's suit and sell it for \$16.95 — advertising that “Only Simpson's Could Produce a Sale Like This.” That wasn't exactly true, since Simpson's was only trying to catch up with Eaton's, who had the equivalent suit for \$16.50.

Cook's evidence that the Toronto department stores were encouraging sweatshops in Quebec was confirmed by a Clarkson, Gordon study. Among its examples was that of a Quebec shoe company that paid its employees wages averaging 12.9 cents an hour. It developed that seventy per cent

of the sweated product was purchased by department stores.

In June the committee turned to working conditions in the department stores themselves. It appeared they had enjoyed continuing profits while cutting their workers' salaries and vacation time. Eaton's employees, for example, had lost not only their annual paid vacations but seven of nine statutory holidays. The store's 25,736 employees were averaging a mere \$970 in annual wages — well below the poverty line — while the company's forty directors averaged an annual \$35,000. Stevens said he could not justify in his mind a department store's "handsome mark-up . . . over 100 per cent — yet women are working for ten and eleven dollars a week."

BY THIS TIME STEVENS WAS THE MAN OF THE HOUR IN Canada. Letters of commendation poured into his office in Ottawa, many suggesting that he become the next leader of the Conservative Party. That did not seem unlikely. It was rumoured that Bennett intended to quit before the next election and accept a British peerage.

But Parliament was prorogued early in July and that meant the committee was automatically dissolved. Stevens, who hadn't finished with the department stores, persuaded Bennett to allow the work to continue by turning the committee into a royal commission, again with himself as chairman. Bennett agreed. But, as it turned out, Harry Stevens — impulsive Harry, intrepid Harry, imprudent Harry — would not be chairing it. He had committed a political blunder.

It stemmed from another speech — one Stevens had made in June just before the session broke up. His audience was the Conservative Study Group Club. It was an informal occasion; Stevens spoke without notes. But a secretary took down his words verbatim and they included an attack on the Robert Simpson Company and Sir Joseph Flavelle, who had at one time been the department store's chief stockholder. Stevens claimed that Flavelle and his associates, after a refinancing in 1928, had stripped the company of \$10-million, leaving it heavily mortgaged. As a result, he said, Simpson's was forced to increase its overhead and press its suppliers to sell for less, thus creating some of the sweatshop conditions that had been revealed by his inquiry.

Stevens's speech, supposedly off the record and certainly off the cuff, was printed in pamphlet form and 3,000 copies distributed. *The Winnipeg Free Press* published the pamphlet in full. The roof fell in.

Stevens had broken an unwritten rule. He had revealed some of the commission's findings before its report was published. In the five federal by-elections that took place in Ontario that September, the Stevens pamphlet became an issue and the Tories lost four of the five. With his twenty-three-year-old daughter, Sylvia, seriously ill in Montreal, Stevens now faced a cabinet attack by two St James Street spokesmen, C.H. Cahan and Sir George Perley. Cahan, a corporate lawyer, had a particular axe to grind with Stevens for one of his clients was Sir Charles Gordon, head of the Dominion Textile Company, and the Stevens inquiry was certainly in the process of blackening that industry. Cahan demanded that Stevens publicly apologize to Flavelle — and not without reason, for Stevens had had some of his facts wrong. For example, Simpson's mark-up on goods had not increased since 1929; in fact it had slightly declined; nor had Flavelle siphoned off the profits in quite the unprinci-

pled way Stevens had implied. Apologize or resign! Cahan insisted. With his daughter close to death, Harry Stevens resigned not only from the cabinet but also from the chairmanship of the new Royal Commission on Price Spreads, scheduled to start sitting on October 30.

The replacement chairman was a Winnipeg lawyer and a strong Tory, William Walker Kennedy. Stevens, however, sat as a commissioner and continued to dominate the proceedings, as well as carrying his cause to the people in a series of speeches demanding government action on the commission's findings.

Cahan sprang to the attack again, insisting that the federal government was not equipped to regulate industry. Stevens countered, on December 3, by announcing that he intended to press in Parliament for a federal trade and industries commission with "unprecedented powers" and that he would also urge that the Combines Act be toughened up. By now he was being widely touted as the successor to Bennett, who was indeed considering retirement.

Two days later, the prime minister announced that he would lead the Conservative Party in the next election. More, he promised that the royal commission would continue its work, that his government would shortly introduce unemployment insurance, and that it would "come more and more to regulate business."

These were remarkable admissions for Bennett to make. They suggested a change of political direction, a move away from the right wing, dominated by men like Cahan, towards the centre or — dared one suggest it? — to the left. But, for all that the prime minister was undergoing an ideological conversion, he was done with his controversial colleague. When Stevens's daughter died on December 21, friends and foes of every political stripe extended their sympathies — with one exception. Harry Stevens did not hear from Richard Bedford Bennett.

ON JANUARY 15, 1935, THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON Price Spreads, which had been sitting for much of the winter, again turned its attention to the needle trades in the province of Quebec.

Four young women, none of whom spoke English, appeared before the commission to describe, through an interpreter, the appalling conditions in the two largest garment manufacturers in Victoriaville — Fashion Craft and Rubin Brothers — whose main customer was the T. Eaton Company of Toronto.

Eleanor Hamel, a twenty-five-year-old seamstress, testified that she had gone to work at the age of thirteen — the minimum age was sixteen, but nobody, it seemed, paid any attention to the law. At Rubin's, where Miss Hamel had worked for the past nine years, a notice over the time clock stated that the minimum wage was ten dollars a week; but nobody paid any attention to that either. Miss Hamel made seven dollars a week and when she asked for ten she was denied it. The foreman jollied her along and, when she threatened to switch to Fashion Craft, told her she would be blacklisted in the community.

Another seamstress, twenty-three-year-old Berthe Nolin, was paid six dollars for an official fifty-five-hour week. At Fashion Craft, her work began at 7 a.m. and was supposed to end at 6 p.m., but she often worked until 10:20 p.m. The foreman punched her out at 6:15 to maintain the fiction that the company was obeying the fifty-five-hour law.

When these women testified before the commission, they were jobless as the result of a strike for better wages and shorter hours by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union. The strike had lasted only four days. At the first hint of trouble, the companies called in strikebreakers and the mayor ordered the fire department to turn its hoses on the picket line. Fourteen provincial policemen then arrived and, according to Berthe Nolin, ordered the strikers to go back to work. But Miss Nolin and some fifty others weren't taken back. The strikebreakers had their jobs.

On January 16, the commission began scrutiny of the T. Eaton Company, concentrating on its Factory F-8, in downtown Toronto, where garments such as women's blouses and dresses and men's trousers were turned out on a piecework basis. Here, the Depression had had a devastating effect. In the first four years piecework rates had been cut by more than half. These drastic reductions presented Eaton's with a problem. Under the Ontario Minimum Wage Act, the company was required to pay its women employees at least \$12.50 a week. In 1929 the seamstresses had had no trouble earning that amount. But the cuts made it difficult for many and impossible for some to make the minimum wage. Required by law to make up the difference, the company instituted a speed-up system to force its employees up to the minimum.

"We were badgered, harassed, and worried," Mrs. Annie Wells testified. "You were told to work and work so hard at these cheaper rates . . . and you were threatened." Mrs. Wells had worked for Eaton's for eighteen years. Eaton's high-powered counsel, R.L. Kellock, K.C. (a future Supreme Court judge), couldn't shake her testimony. "You had no time to get up and have a drink of water or powder your nose or look at anybody," she insisted. "You just kept on working."

Mrs. Wells's daughter, Winnifred, another longtime em-

"If I come back at the end of the week and I fall down again on my money, what is going to happen then?" He said: "You will go home again the second week."

The threat of being fired was always present. At the forewoman's desk a large sheet showed how far each girl was behind in her quota ("black marks," in the parlance of the shop). Those who fell too far behind lost their jobs. Jean Chambers, a veteran of ten years with Eaton's, told of being nudged in the back while she worked and ordered to work faster. "You had better hurry up, speed up, because you are going to be fired, you are not going to be kept on if you cannot make it," the forewoman warned.

"It almost drove me insane," Kate Nolan testified. "I went into hysterics several times, and I had to go to the hospital and the nurse said, 'What is the matter? You girls are always coming here.'"

Many of these practices had come to a sudden end when the formation of the Stevens Committee was announced in February, 1934. Eaton's abruptly stopped sending the poorest producers home and threatening them with unemployment. By March, the company had also decided to place all its employees under the Minimum Wage Act and raise the piecework rates. But it had no intention of letting the women organize a union.

A number in Factory F-8 had formed a committee and joined the International Ladies' Garments Workers' Union. Then, on July 11, 1934, a new and more intricate dress was introduced, one that required fifteen separate operations to make. Thirty-eight members of the union stopped work that afternoon, on the grounds that the dress was so complicated no-one could earn the minimum wage producing it, and asked permission to consult with their union. Eaton's allowed them to leave the building but warned them that they must be back at work before 5:30 in the afternoon. It was an impossibility. By the time

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ployee, told the commissioners that she worked as an examiner and before the Depression had been supplied with a stool. But by 1933 the stools had been removed. Miss Wells was on her feet the whole day, so tired at night that she couldn't eat her supper, so tired that she dreaded getting on the streetcar when she went home, "because if I sat down I could not get up again, my knees and my legs would be so stiff." Hanging over her head was the dread of being sent home again for failing to make her quota. This had already happened once. When Miss Wells accosted one of the higher-ups — a foreman called Mr. Conroy — to demand an explanation, he told her that the company was trying out a new system: every time a girl fell behind in her work, she would be sent home for a week.

"I asked him how I was going to live. I said to him:

One worker, on her feet all day, testified she dreaded the streetcar ride home because "my legs were so stiff, if I sat down I could not get up again"



they had walked to the union office on Spadina Avenue the deadline had been reached. The following morning, Eaton's locked them out.

From the thirty-eight thus fired, the commission was able to select several witnesses. It had not been easy thitherto to persuade anyone to outline Eaton's employment practices. The previous spring, one of Stevens's investigators had interviewed Winnifred Harding, a pieceworker in the factory. As soon as the foreman learned of it, he had fired her for being "a poor producer."

Had the company been less quick to impose a lockout, had the women not lost their jobs in such an arbitrary fashion, the commission would not have had their testimony and the company's treatment of its piecework employees in the early Depression years might never have come to light.

Today, a work stoppage at Eaton's and a subsequent lockout could not be kept from the media. The women did attempt to distribute handbills and carried sandwich boards listing their grievances, but the press paid no attention. No word of the trouble crept into any of the four Toronto dailies, all of which carried several pages of department-store advertising and treated both Eaton's and Simpson's as sacrosanct.

This was a story for the age of television: young women being exploited by a powerful corporation, carrying placards and picketing the biggest store in town. But in those

"You'd better hurry up, speed up," Kate Nolan was warned. When she went to hospital in hysterics, the nurse said, "What's the matter with you girls?"

The Business Girl's Nerves

How to Keep Fit

Many times this question comes to the business girl who finds her nervous system breaking under the strain of the daily grind at the office desk.

No matter what may be the evenings' enjoyment the next day makes its inevitable demand on her delicate nervous system, and she feels that whatever comes she must keep up her efficiency. But how?

Many girls have discovered the answer and find that they can depend absolutely on Dr. Chase's Nerve Food to restore vigor and strength to the nervous system.

Use it when you are tired and discouraged, self-nervous and irritable—run down by overwork or the debilitating effects of worry. In a surprisingly short time you will be feeling and looking better and have the joy of healthful living.

Dr. Chase's Nerve Food
The Greatest of Nerve Restoratives

days even radio (which was less beholden to department-store advertising) didn't have the facilities to cover this kind of news. And so the story went unreported until the following January when the commission heard the testimony of some of the union members.

Even then, newspaper readers in Toronto had to look hard to find it, for the Toronto papers handled this aspect of the hearings very gingerly. On the day that Annie Wells and Jean Chambers testified, the *Star's* front-page headline reassured its readers that EATON F-8 PLANT PAID FAIR WAGE AUDITOR REVEALS. The story failed to make it clear that Eaton's had not changed its policies until after the hearings were announced. That day the paper carried three and a half pages of Eaton's advertisements.

Throughout the session, the *Star* gave far more prominence to Eaton's side of the story than to that of its employees: HOUNDING DID NOT EXIST EATON OFFICIAL TESTIFIES... FACTORY WAGES ARE FAIR EATON ESTIMATOR INSISTS.

At least the *Star* put its coverage on the front page. The other three newspapers rarely did. Again, Eaton's got special treatment. Of nine stories in *The Evening Telegram* between January 16 and January 23, only one headlined testimony from an ex-employee; the others favoured Eaton's. *The Mail and Empire* ran six stories; the Eaton's position was headlined in all but one. *The Globe* was fairer to the employees' testimony but went out of its way to mollify the store by printing a boldface introduction to its opening report, in which an Eaton's official was interviewed and quoted as saying that "we have every assurance of the loyal understanding of the vast majority of our employees during the difficult depression period."

The local coverage of the testimony contrasts sharply with that of *The Winnipeg Free Press*, which, though far removed from what was essentially a Toronto story, treated it as a major scandal. SAYS DRIVING IN FACTORIES MADE WRECK OF GIRLS... SAYS FACTORY GIRLS DRIVEN NEARLY INSANE... TELLS PROBE MINIMUM WAGE ACT BROKEN... TELLS PROBE OF WORKING BY STOP WATCHES.

BY THE TIME THE COMMISSION COMPLETED ITS HEARINGS, Harry Stevens was again the man of the hour. He was lobbying hard with the other ten members of the commission to prepare the toughest report possible, and also with the general public to force acceptance of his recommendations. The present laws, he said, had "holes big enough for millionaires to crawl through and company laws that permitted the fleecing of the public on the one hand and the sweatshops on the other."

The Stevens-for-Party-Leader movement was growing, endorsed by Stevens's old sponsor, Warren K. Cook, and others who recognized that the country was in the mood for reform. Stevens himself, at that point, had no desire for the leadership. And Bennett adamantly refused all attempts at reconciliation with a man he saw as his rival. In fact, Bennett longed for retirement but clung stubbornly to power only to prevent Stevens from taking over. Though the chance of winning another election was slender, the two leading Tories — Bennett with his New Deal, and Stevens with his reputation as a dragon slayer — might have pulled it off if they had worked in tandem, with the support of a united party. Instead, Mackenzie King's Liberals swept Bennett and his Conservatives out of office in October, 1935, as well as defeating every candidate put up by

the new Reconstruction Party except one — the party's maverick founder and leader, Harry Stevens. (Stevens returned to the Conservative caucus in 1939 and retired from politics in 1942.)

Harry Stevens's monument was the report of the price spreads commission. When his successor in the department of trade and commerce, R.B. Hanson, tabled the report in the house on April 12, 1935, it was Stevens, a private member, and not Kennedy, the commission chairman, who leapt to his feet to move its adoption, an unprecedented breach of unwritten rules quite in keeping with Stevens's method of operation.

The report itself, which contained 500 pages of recommendations, was the most important and exhaustive study of economic and social problems ever made by an official body in Canada. Its chief recommendation — a federal trade and industry commission with wide powers of law enforcement — heralded the growing involvement of government in private business. Other recommendations included a tightening and tough enforcement of the Combines Act, the regulation of industrial monopolies, the prohibition of unfair business practices, and more protection for investors and consumers.

The government quickly established a three-man commission to oversee the Combines Act and to prevent cutthroat competition among retailers. Within two years, Ontario, the largest industrial province, accepted, in principle at least, a minimum wage for men — a tiny step forward since the practice wasn't entrenched until 1963. But although the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads were accepted piecemeal and some not at all, its lasting effect has been incalculable for it helped convince ordinary Canadians that business enterprise could never again be entirely free and that the state had not only a role but also a duty to regulate the marketplace. That, too, was a form of revolution, as effective in its own way as that advocated by the radical left. The irony is that it was initiated by the one party to whom control of any kind was anathema.

CANADA HAS ALWAYS BEEN A CAUTIOUS COUNTRY. The Depression made us more cautious than ever. The search for security that brought us family allowances, medicare, and unemployment insurance is still deeply instilled in the Depression generation. The children of those years cling to their jobs as a shipwrecked sailor clings to a raft. Thirty years later, the adult world, raised in the thirties, would be baffled by what it saw as the irresponsibility of a new generation, which thought nothing of quitting work, having a good time, and then casually seeking other employment. The Depression, it might be said, helped foster the generation gap of the sixties.

Lara Duffy, a Toronto housewife who was four years old when her father lost his job in 1932, has never been able to come to terms with her eldest daughter's spending sprees: "Money doesn't mean anything to her. I don't think she's looked at a price tag for years." She herself can't abide waste, can't even bear to discard worn-out clothing, always finds somebody who can use it. "It's just impossible for me to waste things." Yet, in some ways, she is as carefree about spending as her daughter and that too is a result of the Depression: "Some-



Lady Eaton and her son John David arrive to open the new College Street store; in 1934, Eaton's paid wages averaging well below the poverty line

times I have too many of some things. It's a reaction because you had nothing, now you have to have too much of what you were once deprived of." As a schoolgirl she had one pair of shoes. "Now I have lots of shoes; that seems to be something I have to do for me." To this day Mrs. Duffy cannot abide the taste of plum jam or sausage because that was the kind of cheap relief fare her family lived on during the Depression. For all of that time her father was out of work, constantly and vainly seeking a job.

Yet for a good many Canadians there were no hard times. For those who held decent jobs, the thirties was a wonderful period. Because of deflation everything got cheaper. A single man making fifty dollars a month was well off, if not exactly on easy street. He could buy a hamburger for a dime. He could take his girl to dinner and a movie for two dollars; he could buy a tailored suit with two pairs of pants for under twenty.

Bruce Hutchison, then a young political reporter for the *Vancouver Province*, married with two children, lived comfortably even when his wages were cut to fifty dollars a week from fifty-five. "We always had a maid in the house, the best food in our stomachs, two second-hand cars in the garage, and in our minds the smug, bogus security of the fortunate. It never occurred to me that we were well off."

Thousands of Canadians lived as Hutchison did, breezing through the hard times without a care. For them the Depression was a blur, the shabby men selling shoelaces on the street corners as foreign as Laplanders, the newspaper headlines about hunger marches, jobless riots, and sweatshop hounding as far removed as those from Ethiopia, China, and Spain.

One member of this favoured company recalled those times with affection in an interview with a *Maclean's* writer thirty years later. "You could take your girl to a supper dance at the hotel for ten dollars," he remembered, "and that included the bottle and a room for you and your friends to drink it in."

"I'm glad I grew up then. It was a good time for everybody. People learned what it means to work," said John David Eaton. —



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